

Yoon's Political Implosion: Making Pyongyang's Day

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The pantomime that has been South Korean politics for the past fortnight has brought swift smiles to the lips of both Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin. For Kim, in particular, this is the perfect gift and validates the strategic choices made in his last [New Year's Address](#). The South may outgun the North by a factor of ten and more, but the fiasco that was an on-off martial law declaration merely made public that the South's military leadership is ill-disciplined, insubordinate and confused, and the dithering of Seoul's governing party was worse. What's not to like in Pyongyang? The North's much lauded secret weapon, 'single minded unity,' has never looked more powerful in the face of Seoul's indecision and incompetence.



Source: Office of the President of the Republic of Korea, Official Photographer: Kang Min Seok, June 10, 2024

This did not just happen overnight. Recent reports reveal early stages of this plan have been in play for several months as Yoon tried to hide his domestic woes by raising tensions on the Peninsula. This includes the provocative use of the South's [drones](#) to spread propaganda leaflets in Kim Il Sung Square. When that did not elicit a military response, Yoon ordered the South's military to fire on the sites of the North's 'trash' balloons launches, directions that were apparently refused.

The term 'leaderless resistance' is normally applied to the tactics of terrorist groups fearful of infiltration by the state. In Seoul, the term is stood on its head with a state structure inchoate and incompetent. Now with the National Assembly, at the second time of asking, voting for impeachment, the South's decision making goes into limbo for up to 180 days as the Constitutional Court ponders the legitimacy of the vote. All this makes Kim's day as it confirms his strategic pivot while comprehensively sidelining Seoul in any future talks with Trump.

The Backstory

After the car-crash in Hanoi in 2019, Kim Jong Un abandoned the family's forty-year-long venture to normalize relations with Washington. Across four decades—after the fall of the Soviet

Union—American presidents proved immune to any deal, but in 2017, Trump seemed different. Gently coaxed by Pyongyang's foreign affairs establishment, Ri Su Yong in the International Department of the Party and Ri Yong Ho in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kim was convinced a deal was possible that would see cross-recognition under the protective covering of punctuated progress over a decade and more of slow step-by-step initial freezing and incremental backtracking of the North's nuclear program.

But 2017 turned out to be a false dawn. Kim viewed the failure of the 2019 Hanoi Summit as the Republican establishment encircling Trump sabotaging the process and preventing the conclusion of any deal. Concluding Washington's willing were unable to make meaningful changes, Kim purged the doves within his regime in favor of hawks and began to change the course of the country's external affairs.

Subsequent global events reinforced Kim's view of the world and shifting power dynamics. The chaotic US retreat from Afghanistan demonstrated the vulnerability of American military might to the wrong warfare, Russia's invasion of Ukraine exposed spineless decision makers among Ukraine's partners, and Israel's devastation of Gaza proved that Washington's allies could now slip the leash.

Mixed Messages for Kim

No longer the only game in town, Kim saw Washington's loss of control and reaction to China's challenge as the opening encounters in a second Cold War—a lens through which Kim Jong Un now views the world. The crass and chaotic failed *coup d'état* by President Yoon in Seoul confirms his analysis and strengthens his hand. Yet there are spots on the sun. First, Kim needs to massage and spin the events in Seoul for the readers of *Rodong Sinmun*. Pyongyang has never been enthusiastic over advertising the world's color revolutions; wary the North's own citizens might be infected with similar gaudy ideas. Here and now it is possibly worse. Kim started the year [designating](#) the South as the “most hostile state”. It replaced the previous portrayal of the South Korean citizenry as misguided and misled, intimidated under the thrall of Washington and its domestic dupes with a picture of monochrome malevolence. But the fierce resistance to martial law and overwhelming outcry for impeachment over the last two weeks is clearly at odds with Kim's propaganda created to help sell why unification should be abandoned.

As second challenge is the ouster of Assad from Syria. The Assad regime had been a Russian proxy propped up by Moscow and Tehran. Its house of cards collapse suggests a fragility to that support and an inability and/or unwillingness for Moscow to fight a two-front war, even in the long shadow of a threatened Trump-inspired ceasefire in Ukraine. It must strike Kim that were the Peninsula's mutual provocations to turn to skirmishes and threaten escalation to war, like in 1950, Russian engagement could turn out to be coaching from the sidelines with the heavy lifting of mutual assistance sub-contracted to Beijing, which is likely to limit help to the minimum for survival, far short of the resources for victory.

Conclusion

Despite domestic disturbances, semi-insurrections and coups in South Korea, North Korea has never seized these opportunities to renew civil war. Nevertheless, Yoon's failed attempt to consolidate power will give Kim confidence to continue on his chosen path of joining what

decades ago Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski [called](#) the nightmare coalition for the US of China, Russia and Iran. The North's chilly relations with Beijing are likely to become more tepid, while Pyongyang, Moscow and Beijing will all welcome and be grateful for the postponement and cancellations in Seoul's further integration into NATO, the Quad+ or any kind of East Asian Security framework, and the early prospects of a progressive presidency in the South.